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How to help kids get essential school supports

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EN ESPAÑOL

As the year begins with distance or hybrid learning at most schools, many parents are worried that pre-pandemic IEP plans may leave kids without vital services.

Luckily, IEP or 504 plans aren't set in stone. If you're concerned your child is struggling (or that they will be once class gets underway), it might be time to make some additions to your child's plan to incorporate remote learning accommodations.

Here's how you can help your child get the support they need, whatever this school year brings.

Start by collaborating with teachers

With many kids at home at least some of the time, teachers are relying on parents to help them understand what students need.

"Establishing a good working relationship with a teacher is really important, regardless of your child and their needs," says Laura Phillips, PsyD, a clinical neuropsychologist at the

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Most teachers, Dr. Phillips explains, want to help students and everyone understands that this is an unusual time. If you ask for an accommodation they can make, many will try to do so, even if it's not written into your child's plan. If the teacher is unable or unwilling to help your child, then it's time to request an IEP or 504 meeting to discuss creating a remote learning plan.

"You want to reach out to your team with a combination of being empathic and pushy at the same time," recommends Rachel Busman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist. "You want to express both 'I get that my child isn't the only kid on the roster,' and 'My child has a legal document and I'd like to know how you're going to deliver the services.'"

"Students are going to have different needs when they're receiving an education through distance learning," says Paul Barger, Esq., a special education attorney and founder/principal at Barger & Gaines.

Stay focused on what your child needs

Advocating for the support your child needs during remote learning is important, but you're more likely to receive additional accommodations if you're reasonable with your requests. Before the meeting, carefully consider what additional supports are most necessary for your child's learning. "You've got to go for your top two or three priorities," says Dr. Busman. "You're probably not going to be able to access every service that your child is entitled to immediately. So which are the main things that you really want to focus on?" Don't be afraid to include your child's teachers, therapists and support staff in the process and ask for suggestions that might help during remote learning.

Then, gather the evidence of your child's regression to make your case, even though it can be time-consuming. "The most important thing families should do at this time is document their concerns," Barger advises. Create a binder, either physically or electronically, with several categories and include as much documentation as you can:

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- What work they were assigned vs. what they were able to complete
- Meltdowns or refusals
- How long it took to complete the work

"Consider emailing your log to the teacher and special education chairperson every few weeks," Barger recommends. "Be prepared to give detailed reports about your child's present levels of performance at any IEP/504 meetings, and make sure all relevant information you provide is included in the IEP or 504 document."

Be flexible when it comes to different ways your child might receive services — and push your child's team to do the same. "Ask your district to be creative and brainstorm with you on how they can best deliver services to your child," Barger encourages. "Even though we're in the middle of a pandemic, districts still have an obligation to deliver a free and appropriate public education. It just may look a little different than before."

Talk about what services will look like

"The remote learning plan should include how your child's services will be delivered so that it's supportive of your child," says Jodi Musoff, MA, MEd, an educational specialist at the Child Mind Institute. That way, you'll be clear not just on what the accommodations are but how they'll look in practice. Some examples of changes could be:

Paraprofessionals

"Kids have paraprofessionals for different reasons," says Musoff. "Sometimes it's for ADHD, sometimes it's for social difficulties, sometimes it's anxiety." Ordinarily paraprofessionals sit with kids and help them stay engaged and on task — something that can be hard to do from afar. If a paraprofessional is working with your child at a distance, Musoff suggests modifying the plan.

"A paraprofessional working remotely could teach your child planning and organizational strategies," she suggests, "and check in each morning to help them plan their day and follow up at key points so they stick to their plan."

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"It's much easier for kids to hide online than it is in person," notes Dr. Phillips. "By requesting a smaller student-to-teacher ratio in their direct services group, they'll be required to participate more. And if they need additional help, consider requesting shorter but more frequent sessions. It'll work better than extending a 25-minute session into a 45-minute session after they've already spending hours and hours in front of Zoom."

Adaptations for processing speed and executive functioning deficiencies

Taking notes, answering on-the-spot questions, focusing on lessons, understanding multi-step directions, and organizing or composing thoughts are all things that can be difficult for children with slow processing speed or executive functioning issues even at the best of times. During remote learning, they can be close to impossible. Here are some modifications to consider:

- Emailed copies of notes from the teacher's lesson
- Allowing your child to record the lessons or having the teacher provide recorded lessons
- Voice-to-text technology to assist with writing or typing
- Questions provided ahead of calls so your child can prepare their answers
- Detailed lists of instructions for assignments
- Additional time to turn in assignments

Adjust the amount screen time

Many children are struggling with the amount of time they're required to spend looking at a screen during remote learning. The concentration required and amount of virtual work can be difficult, especially when it's mainly accessed and completed on a screen instead of by hand.

"Ask if the teacher will let your child join the lessons for the amount of time they can manage," says Musoff. "And slowly build up to more time, minute by minute, until they

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teacher.

Include additional emotional support

"For most kids, this is a mental health disaster," says Dr. Phillips. "The uncertainty of what life looks like right now, the significant transitions and the awareness of their parents' stress is taking a toll. This can make it hard to learn. Your brain doesn't effectively take in and retain information when it feels unsafe."

Dr. Phillips notes that kids receiving school-based counseling may need additional support during this time. And those whose IEP or 504 doesn't include counseling services may also need some temporary help, so don't hesitate to bring up this option if stress, anxiety or other mental health challenges seem to be interfering with your child's learning. If your child isn't building peer relationships in the classroom, you might also consider adding small group therapeutic sessions or a school-based social skills group to their plan.

If you're concerned the amount of work is contributing to your child's emotional distress try asking if the teacher can modify the assignments. If they aren't willing to do so, then request this accommodation on their distance learning plan. Some common modifications include:

- **Reducing the amount of work** by answering every other math problem, completing only the first page of an assignment or writing one essay instead of three.
- **Modifying the content** so, for example, they only choose between two multiple choice answers instead of four.
- **Decreasing the level of difficulty** for an assignment or in a certain subject if they're struggling to understand the concept or are below grade level.
- **Assigning alternative projects or presentations** that still allow the child to demonstrate an understanding of the material. This could mean they create a video or draw a comic strip instead of writing a paper, produce a multimedia poster instead of giving a presentation or

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start there," she adds. "Take it step by step."

Remember that it's a difficult time for everyone, including teachers and special education departments. Starting from an understanding that your child's services will look different and approaching any problems in a collaborative and creative manner will help you obtain the support your child needs to succeed during this challenging school year.

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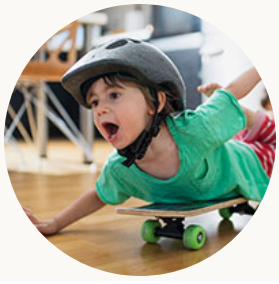

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